

Portrayal of Women in Male Authored Plays in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper analyzed select male authored plays in Nigeria, foregrounding in the process, how women are portrayed. The methodology adopted is descriptive and in the main deductive arising from the analyses of the play-texts. The plays authored by male dramatists reveal a multi-focal thrust in the portrayal of women. They foreground a bias for and against strong female characterization. In most contemporary male authored texts, women are poorly represented. The overriding focal thrust of male playwrights has always been to foreground the physical, prurient negative nature of women. There are a few male playwrights however who portray women in their plays as talented and capable of achieving great things. These playwrights are termed gynacritics and they include among others, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Iyorwuese Hagher and Bode Sowande. Women's portrayal as sex objects and mostly as docile mothers and wives forecloses their other capabilities. There should therefore be a fundamental change in gender relations so as to recognize the role of women as complementary partners in the process of development.

Keywords: Contemporary, Male Authored, Gynacritics, Select, Nigeria

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In a raft of mainly male-authored plays, women are seen as either angelically virtuous or more often, as dangerous, duplicitous and rapaciously greedy. (Banham et al, p.xiii)

Women are poorly represented in contemporary male texts. Nelly Furman captures this ugly scenario when she says "*in a world defined by man, the trouble with woman is that she is at once an object of desire and an object of exchange, valued on the one hand as a person in her own right, and on the other considered simply as a relational sign between*" (p.61). Nigerian male writers rarely paint positive images of women in their fiction. If they are not depicted as docile wives whose identities are recognized through their husbands, they gain identity through motherhood". Adewuji in his article, "Male Involvement in Domestic Affairs: Some Reflections," seems to corroborate this view when he says:

Among all Nigerians but to a larger extent among rural, urban, poor, illiterate and non-illiterate ones, a woman, just like a little child, should only be seen and heard. In fact, within the pervasive extended polygamous network, she is regarded as a little higher in esteem than household chattels (130).

Nnolim graphically captures this debased image of African women as depicted by sexist writers like Achebe and Ekwensi—women created helpless, dependent, brutalized, disparaged, either concubines or prostitutes destined in Ogunyemi's words "*to carry foofoo and soup to men dealing with important matters.*" According to Nnolim:

Right from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness both for themselves and for their male counterparts". The image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy (p.165).

This picture of women is the same in the works of male authors in other parts of Africa. Nawal El Saadawi in her article, "The Heroine in Arab Literature" posits that:

Among the male authors I have read, both in the West and in the Arab world; irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free him from this age-old image of women handed down to us from an ancient past no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defense of human rights, human values and justices, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form. (520)

Soheir El Kalamawi provides a more illuminating portrait of the woman in phallogocentric texts:

A capricious vamp, a playful and beautiful slave, a she devil imbued with cunning and capable of a thousand artifices, an explosive danger versed in all the arts of deceit and conspiracy, a seductive mistress captivating in her passion. She is as positive and dynamic as Satan and his evil spirits, wherever matters of sex and love are concerned. Woman in all the aspects of the role she is made to play, whether it be that of a queen or a slave bought from the market, remains a slave. (Cited in Saadawi, p.521)

This view coheres with Zaki Mobarak's that "*women have a greater power to destroy men than Satan and all his devils together*" (Cited in Saadawi, p.522). In his novel *D'a El Karawan*, Taha Hussein paints a picture of woman:

As a being who, gravitates inertly within the orbit of man without weapons or power or

strength or a will to do anything, even fending for herself. She is always a victim, destroyed, annihilated. She is annihilated by man, but also by a host of other things: love, hatred and vengeance, and a total subjugation to man that extends to all aspects of her life whether material, psychological, emotional or moral (Cited in Saadawi, p.523).

A gleaming of the above portraits shows how in male authored texts, phallogocentric views attempt to subordinate woman to man.

To Blamire, *"the stereotyping of female roles in male-produced literature has a negative influence on women readers in imposing traditional roles upon them"* (p.24). Stereotypes, according to Walter Lipmann:

Are culturally determined pictures that intrude between an individual's cognitive faculties and his or her perceptions of the world". Gender stereotypes are therefore "consensual beliefs about the different characteristics of men and women." (Cited in Crawford and Unger, p.49)

Josephine Donovan observes that "female characters are often depicted only in relation to male protagonists rather than as seats of consciousness in themselves" (Cited in Ekwueme, p.24). In Nigerian drama, the portrayal of female characters by male dramatists tallies with the evinced views of Blamire and Donovan.

In the pre-colonial period, in Nigeria the economic role of women offered them considerable power over the sharing of resources. Westernization and colonialism robbed them of the right, as Western capitalism relegated women's traditional roles to social and domestic categories and increased their dependency on husbands, fathers and sons. According to Morolake Omonubi-McDonnell:

Colonialism was a disengaging experience that obliterated and stifled the voice of women. The colonial strategy of circuitous control created a gender-oriented executive establishment that endures in spite of decolonization. The British government's socio-economic approaches that handicapped women and the political arrangement that empowered men to rule women are continually blamed for the current disadvantaged status of women in Nigeria. Both strategies robbed women of their traditional authority. (p.100)

The above view is attested to by Okoh:

It was the colonization, which to a high degree that upset the legal arrangement of Nigerian communities by the introduction of the nineteenth century European notions of patriarchy. As a result, the traditional system, which gave women the opportunity to exercise their rights in both private sphere and public domain, was disrupted (p.31).

Cheryle Johnson in "Class and Gender" asserts that *"Both indigenous patriarchy and imposed colonial patriarchal customs and laws figure in women's oppression"* (p.237). Bolanle Awe states that in the pre-colonial period, women were... to be found in virtually all spheres of human endeavour... they were active in agriculture... the field of politics and decision-making, they played a prominent role at the local level (pp.314-315).

With the incorporation of Nigeria into international economy as a supplier of raw materials, new patriarchal conceptions of the appropriate social role for women dictated by colonial administrators and missionaries changed the position of women in economic and therefore social endeavours. Males began to dominate the international market and confined women to the growing of crops which received lower returns. By focusing on men, the cash crop farmers' bureaucratic efforts to improve agriculture further encouraged the separation of economic roles of men and women that had previously complemented each other. The creation of the colonial economy thus tended to marginalize the position of the majority of women. Colonial administrators and Christian missionaries introduced the assumptions of European patriarchy into Nigerian society. Their ideas of the appropriate social role for women differed greatly from the traditional role of women in indigenous Nigerian societies. The ideas of the colonizers resembled the patriarchal European assumption that women belonged to the home, engaged in child rearing- an exclusively female responsibility- and other domestic chores. The colonizers expected African societies to consider women as subordinate to men because Europeans considered women subordinate to men. They thought that if a woman obtained financial independence she might not give her husband and his family their entitled respect.

In pre-colonial indigenous Nigerian societies, however, a woman's role included providing for her family by means of financial support. Her traditional responsibility required her financial independence. Furthermore, many members of the extended family helped to rear the children, not only the mother. The restrictions that colonial governments placed on women changed the position of women in indigenous societies. In Nigeria, the colonial state passed legislation restricting women, indirectly preventing them from performing their duties towards their families. The extent of the changes inspired many Nigerian women to hold a series of protests throughout the colonial period against particular colonial policies and against colonialism itself. The 1929 Aba Women's War challenged the British administration for neglecting to involve the women in decision-making processes. The Abeokuta Women Union led by Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti demanded for the abdication of the Alake, Ademola 11 and the abolition of the sole native authority system put in place by the

colonial masters that was exploiting the women. She demanded that there should be “*no taxation without representation*.” She fought against the flat rate tax saying that women are not obliged to pay separate tax from their husbands since the women do not participate in governance (Okoh, p.41). Colonialism disrupted the traditional system of production in indigenous Nigerian societies, reinforcing the existing systems of social inequality and introducing oppressive forms of social stratification throughout the state.

This work shall analyze select male authored plays in Nigeria with the intent to exteriorize how women are portrayed. This analysis will cover the period of Nigeria’s post-independence to contemporary Nigerian drama. Select plays of some frontline Nigerian playwrights such as Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J.P.Clark, Femi Osofisan among others will be examined here.

Osita C. Ezenwanebe’s classification of women as represented in African dramatic literature suffices here:

The active women and the inactive women. Inactive women refer to women who are dependent on men and whose lives become conditioned by patriarchal culture. They are silent “dumb” women who have no voice and hence dare not speak out their mind or air their voices, especially if those views are in opposition to those of the society. These groups of women are completely subdued by the sanctity and supremacy of the gods or their surrogate cultural tradition, which is symbolized physically in the “man head” because they have no power to make decisions. The second group of women (active) are those who do not merely feel or express their feeling of oppression but courageously and confidently step out to act their feeling. (Cited in Ejiofor, pp. 28-29)

The plays authored by male dramatists in Nigeria, reveal a multi-focal thrust in the portrayal of women. They foreground a bias for and against strong female characterization. In the plays of the first generation playwrights, female characters were largely influenced by traditional values which saw the woman as subordinate to man. These dramatists were male writers, whose visions were and are to a large extent traditional as well as cultural. Their texts are phallogocentric reflecting the Lacanian position that social arrangements such as culture, language and writing are dominated by the phallus, which is the symbolic order. In these texts, negative attributes are assigned to female characters. Examples could be found in Wole Soyinka’s Sunma in *The Strong Breed* and the helpless young Bride in *Death and the King’s Horseman* who are weak and inactive. Rola in *A Dance of the Forests* is a woman with a fatal attractiveness whose path is littered with dead lovers who she has callously sent to their death. In *Kongi’s Harvest*, Segi is described as “*a right cannibal of the female species*” who sucks the vigour and vitality from men, leaving them like “sugar cane pulp squeezed dry”. This stereotype image of the women is a negation of the struggle for female emancipation. It places women within a certain culture and circumscribes their contribution to societal development. Theresa Njoku expresses the same view when she states that such stereotypes are “aimed at affirming sexist values, boosting male ego and psychology and strengthening sexist political ideology. The result is a further subordination of the woman”. The tendency by male authors such as Soyinka to assign mostly negative attributes to female characters is explained by Luce Irigaray in her book *Speculum de L’autre Femme*. Her position is that patriarchal discourse situates woman outside representation. She is absent, negative or at best a lesser man. Segi is also portrayed as active. She acts as a catalyst in revolutionary socio-political change. She helps in the overthrow of the dictator- Kongi by mobilizing some ‘rehabilitated’ prostitutes and others disgruntled with Kongi’s regime. Her dominant image however is that of the voluptuary. This is clearly portrayed in her relationship with Daodu whom she pleads with to make love to her in the scene prior to the confrontation with Kongi. Amope in *The Trials of Brother Jero* is portrayed in a negative light. Her outstanding characteristic is her quarrelsome nature, which drives her husband almost to the point of insanity. There is also the young girl who always passes before the prophet on her way to take a swim and comes back remarkably transformed from being dirty to “clean, wet, shiny face and hair” is usually a distraction to the prophet. This happens during his times of meditation and prayers and is a source of temptation as he is normally sexually attracted to her. This informs his prayers for deliverance assisted by Chume in the following dialogue:

Jero: Tear the image from my heart. Tear this love for the daughters of Eve...

Chume: Adam, help’ am. Na your son, help’am. Help this your son...

Jero: Burn this lust for the daughters of Eve. (p.21)

Another female character is the one that runs after the beggar drummer boy who had abused her. She is described in the following way: “*Sash tightened around her waist wrapper pulled so high up that half the length of her thigh is exposed. Her sleeves are rolled above the shoulder....*” The effect the woman has on the prophet is so much that he abandons his congregation to Chume and goes after her. Women on the whole are presented as being either quarrelsome or seducers of men. In most of Soyinka’s plays women are negatively portrayed. For instance, in *The Lion and the Jewel* Sidi is portrayed as gullible. To adumbrate her gullibility, Oyin Ogunba has this to say:

The reference to “village goddess” must conjure up in Sidi’s mind a host of associations, including praise-names, tremendous annual masks, and the immortalization of her beauty.

This is the thing that works the miracle, for what village girl would not yield confronted with a man who, at sixty two, is still capable not only of youthful energy, but also such a fascinating play of emotions? (p.53).

He goes on to say that “Sidi’s self-esteem can be served equally well by modern means; once she has been flattered by the photographs. Most ironically, Sidi finally ends up accepting Baroka for a husband even though he seduced her, because she does not care to have her gullibility mocked at great length” (p.118). In the play, Sidi is represented as a priceless object to be sought and possessed by men. This image of woman as a helpless but priceless possession to be protected by the stronger sex is graphically enacted in the pantomime in the play (pp.15-17) in which Lakunle plays the lost-traveler. She is also represented as an active participant in the fight against the trampling of culture. In the play, Sidi boldly confronts Lakunle, iconic of cultural contamination, especially on the issue of bride-price.

Soyinka portrays women who in most cases are altruistic and who propagate Nigerian cultural traditions rather than their personal needs as women. For instance in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Iyaloja and the girls are represented as agents in the propagation and sustenance of the culture of a people. This is evident in the cultural role they play in encouraging Elesin-Oba to commit his assigned ritual suicide. In Soyinka’s play, women act as vanguards of cultural mores. Iyaloja is an earth mother whose embodiment of traditional wisdom dumbfounds the white man—Mr. Pilkings.

Soyinka’s active women, however, help in perpetuating the culture that is supercilious and oppressive to them. They are portrayed as slaves to culture, they willy-nilly help in sustaining. This portrayal is against the feminist ideal that seeks to pulverize oppressive and repressive aspects of culture. Soyinka does not provide us with a glimpse into the domestic or private lives of the women in his plays. In *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Soyinka’s female characters are more positively portrayed. Two female characters- Mama Put and Miseye play significant roles as they participate actively in the events of the play. Mama Put is shown to be a very courageous and hard working woman. She is able to rebuild her life despite her heavy losses during the civil war. She makes a new home for her children and is able to send them all to school including the university just from selling food on the street. She is also very active in the revolution of the masses against their oppressors. Miseye who is a bourgeois class, commits class suicide, abandoning her class by embracing the values represented by Sanda. Her character is similar to that of Titubi in *Morountodun*. In his early plays, women are usually passive hangers on. In early Nigerian fiction works, female characters were usually portrayed in negative light or not given any major role. Femi Osofisan explains this trend:

As far as the women are concerned, the bulk of our literature is secretly a weapon of male propaganda, of an agenda to keep the female under perpetual dominance... they mention works like Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Clark’s *Song of a Goat*, Wale Ogunyemi’s *The Divorce* and so on, as examples of this sexist agenda (p.4).

The negative portrayal reflects the highly patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society dictated by cultural beliefs. Ahmed Yerima explains this further:

The masculine traditional cannon has always dominated the African consciousness concerning beliefs and existence. The culture, the tradition, the languages, the names, the types of vocation, even the biological and physiological structure of human as determined by this environment and nature, have always reemphasized the dominance of the male. Man grew with such cultural beliefs, believing in it, guided through life by the society, and practicing such beliefs even in later stories he created to his death. The female counterpart was made to accept it as the only way... woman was indeed a stereotype, a symbol of life, cocooned by cultural beliefs (pp.59-60).

J.P.Clark’s Ebere in *Song of a Goat* is portrayed as a seducer who entices her husband’s younger brother into a sexual relationship. She bears along with Tonye the punishment for the crime of adultery they commit; Oreami in *Ozidi* is a supernatural character, who employs her power to instill fear into her community. Orukorere in *Song of a Goat* is analogous to Oreame in regard to the supernatural powers they share. Woyengi in *Woyengi* by Gabriel Okara, also shares some of this mystical nature. Woyengi, involved in creation, has to contend with other powerful and diabolical forces, which she overcomes and this makes her a powerful female character, too. In the play, Woyengi is conceived of as a female deity who is the creatrix, who creates all things in heaven and on earth, who gives children to the Izon. Also in the play, we see society’s disdain with the barren as shown in Ogboinba’s self-hatred as a result of her barrenness. She even contemplates returning to Woyengi to challenge her fate even though, that was what she asked from the great mother. Her desperation for a child is informed by patriarchal dictates.

In Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, women are naïve, ordinary and foolish. Women are also portrayed as illiterates in the characters of Mama Rashida and Sikira who are viewed as uneducated and uncivilized about people, places and issues. Rotimi is however, supportive of the feminist cause in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. He distances himself from inferior viewpoints held about women in society. He revolts

against the debased look society has of women and their confinement to the domestic realm. Women are not considered highly in state matters. In the play, the advocacy for women's liberation is advanced by Sikira in her conflict with her husband, Lejoka-Brown. Rotimi seems to agree with Sara Delemont's position that: "*Cliches and myths such as a woman's place is in the home. Women only work pin money and women are too emotional... and even the right place for women in the movement is prone underlie a great many theories in sociology.*" Rotimi's alignment with Delemont's is evident in the way he treats women in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Sikira's rebellious stance and theory of equality of the sexes is the result of Liza's pedagogic role in the play. Liza is seen as the transporter of sexual equity from the western scene to the African setting. Sikira's quest for self-identity is vividly conveyed in one of her caustic responses to her husband Lejoka-Brown: "*Do as you say, do as you say! It is always do as you say. Always command, command, command! Why don't you show some respect and let me do as I want, just once*" (p.57). Queen Ojuola in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* has no capacity to protect herself from the gods' will, she is a passive recipient and victim of the decree of the gods. She is too passive to avert the destiny that is to befall her and her son Odewale while Mosadiwin's contribution in *Kurunmi*, is merely culinary (Evwahierhoma, p.79).

In Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath*, Altine, a supposedly mute female character regains her power of speech and thus her freedom through her individual ability to affirm herself. A point that is immediately noticeable about Osofisan's female characters in *Morountodun and Other Plays* is their ability to hold strong views and be committed to the cause the views represent (Green, p.245). In *Morountodun*, Osofisan portrays Titubi as a social reformer in the mould of Moremi. She is bold and daring. She obstructs the staging of a play she perceived to be critical of her privileged class. She risked her life by living in the midst of the rebels with the intention of knowing the leader of the rebels and handing him over to the police. In the end, she gets sympathetically attached to the masses as the mass of their oppression is laid bare before her eyes. She therefore does everything within her power to effect reconciliation between the warring forces through the window of dialogue.

Another aspect of the characterization of women, noticeable largely in *Morountodun* and to a lesser extent in *Red is the Freedom Road* is the portrait of women as people who are capable of changing circumstances to their advantage and to the advantage of the larger society (Green, pp.247-248). Osofisan has other positively portrayed female characters—Ibidun in *Red is the Freedom Road*, Yajin and Funlola in *The Chattering and the Song*, Alhaja in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Titubi and Moremi in *Morountodun* and Olabisi in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. A close scrutiny of his plays shows that Osofisan activates women for the service of the masses and not necessarily for personal aggrandizement. In *The Chattering and the Song*, Yajin and Funlola play active roles with other male members of the farmers union in the quest for the restructuring of society for the benefit of all. In the view of Awodiya, Funlola and Yajin are imbued with positive, progressive and revolutionary qualities. They are portrayed as forceful characters who stand firmly alongside Sontri and Leje in their revolutionary quest for social change. Funlola and Yajin demonstrate their commitment to social change by becoming disciples of Sontri and Leje (Asen, p.141). Osofisan's style of female characterization is gynacritical, a deviation from the phallogocentric depiction of women we encounter in the plays of Soyinka, Rotimi and others in their early dramas. Titubi a modern recreation of Moremi displays much courage as she infiltrates the farmers' camp to help in quelling the farmers' revolt. However, in the camp, her values change as she selflessly abandons her bourgeoisie class and labours side by side with the farmers in their revolutionary struggle against the oppressive state. Again Awodiya provides a picture of her role in the play thus:

Titubi already belongs to the rich, privileged class. She is bold, courageous and undaunted. Infact she is the most daring and forceful of all the heroines in Osofisan's plays. This heroine of extraordinary qualities abandons her riches and opulent lifestyle to infiltrate the peasants' ranks... Titubi becomes the rallying point and a source of inspiration for the peasants in the play, thus she becomes the symbol of Osofisan's social justice who is fully conscious of her social status and the sordid condition which must be fought and challenged (qtd in Asen, p.144).

Ukaegbu's view of the roles of women in *Morountodun* can be summarized as follows:

Morountodun is not revolutionary for eulogizing women's contribution to society, it is dramaturgically significant as in it, Osofisan avoids character simpleness and tokenistic presentation of women, creating instead, strong complex women who command similar ideological and intellectual statures as men. They fight beside men as equals and resist marginalization from decision-making on gender grounds (p.180).

Osofisan is a gynacritic, he portrays women in his plays as talented and capable of achieving great things. He does not sexually objectify his female characters as was common in the plays of early dramatists. Other Nigerian playwrights who are gynacritical in their portrayal of women include Olu Obafemi in *Nights of a Mystical Beast*, Iyorwuese Hagher in *Mulkin Mata*, and Bode Sowande in *A Sanctus for Women* among others. Sowande has portrayed revolutionary women represented by Joloki and Ibilola in *Farewell to Babylon* and *The Night Before* respectively.

CONCLUSION

The overriding focal thrust of male playwrights has always been to foreground the physical, prurient, negative nature of woman. By their negative portrayal of women, men expose their propensity to suppress women. Women are seen as responsible for all the ills of the society. They are noted for moral bankruptcy, loose tongue, gossip, flippancy, rumour mongering, hypocrisy, treachery, and many more. These allegations against women are mere figments of male imagination. Women's portrayal as sex objects and mostly as mothers and wives forecloses their other capabilities. Feminists are engaged in the struggle for a fundamental change in gender relations so as to recognize the role of women as full and active participants in the development process.

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